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B. H. Bailey
Coe College

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SUCCESSFUL "MINK FARMING" IN IOWA.

B. H. BAILEY.

Through the kindness of Prof. C. C. Nutting, Senator Lambert and his brother, Mr. C. Lambert, of Sabula, Iowa, the writer was afforded an opportunity to visit and study the "mink farm" owned by Mr. C. Lambert and J. E. Densmore, of Sabula, Iowa.

The mink has been regarded as one of the most difficult animals to rear in captivity, owing to its natural temper and habits, but the present successful effort which was started in 1910 has added not a little to our knowledge of the mink in captivity and the best methods of handling it.

There are at present in this "minkery" thirty-seven individuals. These are all in perfect health and under absolute control of the owners. The individual cages in which they are kept insure the isolation which is natural to the animals in their native state, and at the same time afford an opportunity for close observation of each individual as well as a perfect control of each in feeding and breeding.

The first litter of six young was born in captivity May 7, 1910. They were the offspring of a female which was secured by trapping. Only three out of the thirty-seven which now occupy the cages were trapped. The rest have all been born in captivity. The advantage of having minks raised in captivity for breeding purposes rather than those that have been trapped, lies in the fact that they are more docile, and having known no other home do not seek to escape. An excellent illustration of this fact came under the observation of the owners at one time. A board having been loosened in one of the cages, there was given an opportunity to one of the animals to make its way out. The mink availed itself of this opportunity but was not missed until it was seen coming home. It entered the cage by the same opening through which it had made its exit, and gave every evidence of having come back because it regarded this place as its natural abode. On another occasion a mink was reported

at some distance from the mink farm. The animal had entered a chicken-house and had killed two chickens when it was discovered by the woman who owned the fowls. She drove the mink out of the chicken-house, but it ran in again, keeping just out of her reach. She reported the occurrence to Mr. Lambert because the mink appeared to be so tame and apparently feared her so little. This animal later returned to the cage. Mr. Lambert was not aware that there had been any successful efforts to rear minks in captivity elsewhere in the state of Iowa at the time of his first experiments. His purpose originally was to demonstrate in the first place that it is possible to rear these animals in captivity and in the second place the advance in the price of furs would, he thought, warrant the raising of these animals for their pelts, provided they could be bred successfully and their fur kept in as good condition as in the wild state. He is satisfied as to both these points and believes that there need only be a suitable market to make the business a profitable one.

Some years ago Mr. Lambert sold as beautiful pelts as he had ever seen for seventy-five cents each. In 1911, No. 1 extra large dark minks were bringing \$9.00. The price in 1916 has ranged between five and six dollars.

Among the interesting facts which have been noted with regard to these captive minks are the following:

The usual breeding season in this locality is from the 10th or 12th of March to about the end of the first week in April.

The period of gestation is six weeks and the litters range from three to seven. The average litter is four or five, and but one litter is raised in a year. The young are about an inch and a half to two inches long at birth and it is a number of days before they open their eyes.

Young male minks can usually be recognized by their size, as they are slightly larger than the females.

The cry of the little ones is a high pitched whine. In the wild state, the mink is known to move its young from one locality to another if it is in the least disturbed. This tendency is noticeable in the animals in confinement. The only period when the mink is not a solitary animal seems to be during the time when the female is caring for the young. By the following spring the

young animals have attained their adult size and do not seem to grow after they are two years old. They may lay on flesh, becoming heavier, but the bony framework does not seem to enlarge. Male minks born during one year will breed the following spring.

Since the animals do not pair, but in their natural haunts are accustomed to travel about, the males going long distances from place to place during the breeding season, it has been noted with interest that one male will serve several females, and it is the custom usually to use the male not oftener than every other day.

The cry of the male is a short grunting snuffle. The female gives a high pitched squealing cry. The offensive odor of the scent glands, noticed when the hide is being removed from a dead mink, was not noticeable about the pens, except at the time when a pair were being bred.

It is known that in its natural haunts the mink will accommodate itself to almost any hole that is dry. In the cages small boxes about eight inches square and a foot and a half long, having a circular opening about four inches in diameter at one end, and partly filled with grass, afford a suitable substitute for their natural homes. It is known that minks will sometimes climb into trees if closely pursued by dogs, and their ability to run about on various surfaces was noticed in the cages, where they were exceedingly agile and very noisy. They seemed to enjoy pushing their water pans about, apparently for the purpose of hearing the clatter, and when one approached the front of the cage, the animals in many instances climbed up on the quarter inch wire mesh, showing almost the agility of squirrels.

The food supplied to these captive minks is doubtless much the same as is procured by the wild animals. They enjoy fish, crayfish, musk rats, and rabbits above other foods, and also eat mice, wild birds, poultry and beef steak. A mixture of corn meal mush with a little tallow, has been successfully fed to minks in captivity, and they also will eat bread and milk. It is found that salted food if continuously fed is fatal. On one occasion when some salted fish were fed, fourteen or fifteen young died as a result of eating them. The full grown mink will readily go into the water and capture a fish twelve inches long or more, and eventually devour the bones and all. It is a

habit where there are several fish in a small pool to kill all before eating any of them. A live rabbit which was introduced into one of the cages was very quickly killed by a male mink.

It is the custom to feed minks in captivity once a day. Running water is preferable, but not necessary, and it was noted that where water has been frozen in the pans the minks gnawed at the ice and lapped up the particles that were dislodged. The method of drinking milk is similar to that of the cat.

The mink is a very cleanly animal, and the cages which, because of the cold weather, had not been cleaned recently, were wholesome and free from odor.

The chief factor in the success of this mink farm lies in the care and skill shown by the owners in housing, feeding, and breeding.

The individual cages are about six feet long by three feet high, and three feet wide. They are built of pine and wire mesh, the pine box having part of the top at one end and all of the contiguous end of one-fourth inch mesh wire. That part of the top which is of wire swings upward on hinges and affords easy access to the interior of the cage. Within, on the floor, is a litter of straw and grass, a pan for water, and the box previously described, in which the mink makes its nest.

It has been found best not to handle them and the easy method by which handling is avoided and the supposedly difficult process of getting an animal from one cage to another simplified, reveals the careful planning by the owners in the conduct of this experiment. Along the front of each cage and connecting each cage to every other one in the house is a small wire-constructed alley about six inches high and wide. At each partition between cages, this alley is fitted with a sliding drop door, much like the stop to a grain spout. The door from the cage into the alley way is similarly guarded by a drop door which can readily be operated from the outside of the cage. If it is desired to clean the cage this door is raised, a little rattling of the wire induces the mink to enter the run-way, the door is closed and he is prevented from going back into the cage, and can not follow the run-way farther than to the limits of the partitions between the cages, where, as noted before, there are drop doors to close that particular section. The run-way so closed forms a box three feet long by six inches wide and high.

If it is desired to transfer this animal to any other cage, the alley-way is opened all the way to the cage which it is desired to have the mink enter, and the door is opened into that cage.

No other mink can enter the runway at that time and the animal in the run-way can go only to the place intended.

The advantage of this method of control is evident in breeding, since exact records are kept of the date of breeding, and the pedigree of the animals bred.

The docility of the animals, their evident lack of shyness and the readiness with which they are induced to go in the direction desired evidences the careful work of the owners.

The houses, or rather sheds, used at Sabula are cement floored and built much like chickenhouses. There are sky-lights but Mr. Lambert believes that the more the animals are kept in the dark the better will be their fur.

In one of the two houses there were twenty-six cages, and twenty-four in the other. A device for running water is being installed that will doubtless be a convenience to the owners and a comfort and pleasure to the minks.

Up to the present time at the minkery, no animals have been killed for the fur since it is desired to increase the stock for supplying other "minkeries."

The readiness with which such an industry might be developed, since the entire equipment requires only a part of an ordinary city lot, and the fact that since in most towns running water is as accessible as in the country, makes it a suitable industry for the city as well as the country.

A "minkery" in your back yard or in your neighbor's, would conduce to more neighborly feelings and sounder sleep of mornings than a hen yard, especially if a couple of lusty roosters are included among the inmates.

Former experiments in mink raising have failed on account of ignorance of the real needs of these animals and of their habits. They can not be allowed to run together as the males fight fiercely and inbreeding would weaken the stock. The care afforded each individual mink from the time its parents are selected to the time it reaches maturity, results in producing large animals with fur that is of a superior quality and that need be taken only when the fur is prime.

It is a beautiful sight to see these little sleek-bodied active animals moving about the cage and coming to the wire un-

afraid when one approaches the cages, and the contrast is more marked to one who knows the sly, secretive, vicious character of these animals in the wild. When the old time trapper shall have passed and the last pair of steel jaws shall have rusted away, we may still wrap ourselves comfortably from the wintry blasts because of the successful solution of those who have established the industry of mink farming.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE LITTLE SPOTTED SKUNK, *SPILOGALE INTERRUPTA* RAF.

B. H. BAILEY.

In volume XXII of the Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science, it was shown that the Little Spotted Skunk is state-wide in its distribution. Since writing the last article, I have received specimens from Muscatine, Iowa, from Mr. J. Greenblatt; also from Mr. Christian Hoeg, of Decorah, Iowa, who states that they seem to be quite common in that vicinity; and also from Sabula, Iowa, at which place Mr. J. C. Day and son had received during the winter of 1915 and 1916, up to the 17th of March, 1916, twenty-five pelts of "civet cats," trapped in the immediate vicinity of Sabula. Further effort to discover whether the Little Spotted Skunk has crossed the Mississippi to the Illinois side has resulted negatively in the region of Muscatine and Davenport, but from Mr. C. H. Swift of Sabula, Iowa, I learned that he had personally trapped two specimens of the Little Spotted Skunk on the Illinois side of the Mississippi river, north of Savannah, "twenty years ago." These two specimens were caught while trapping for larger skunks. That they have not become common in that region is evident by the testimony of several men in Savannah, notably, Mr. George N. Machen, who has for many years been a close observer of the wild life in that region. Careful inquiry has further confirmed the statement that "civet cats" are far less abundant in the eastern part of the state than are the common large skunks, and that they become relatively more numerous in middle and western Iowa. The firm of J. C. Day & Son, at Sabula, up to date, had purchased 814 hides of the common skunk, while as before stated, only twenty-five skins of the "civet cat" or Little Spotted Skunk had been purchased during the same time.